

# The Unseen Fat Woman: Fatness, Stigma, and Invisibility in Mrs. Wolowitz from *The Big Bang Theory*

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*“Difference demands display. Display demands difference.” - Mitchell and Snyder, 55*

This epigraph strikes at the core of the historical and cultural phenomenon that is the freak show. As an institution that derives its attraction from difference, the freak show displays individuals who are not considered “normal.” But the function of displaying difference goes beyond mere entertainment. Freak shows existed as a form of societal self-definition for the people who paid to gain entrance to the shows. Society defined itself by projecting upon the freak show all of the undesirable traits and the concerns they had about the ever-changing world. In particular, the exhibition of fat women in the freak show embodied spectators’ fears about losing control of their bodies, represented as gaining weight. By contrasting themselves with the fat women, they were given an opportunity to identify who they were, or as disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls it, “an opportunity to formulate the self in terms of what it is not” (59). As a result, the freak show codified the idea that fatness was abnormal, unhealthy, and undesirable; and in contrast, it reinforced the notions that thinness was normal, healthy, and ideal. And behind the “unhealthy” nature of the fat body lies a belief that the fat body is out of control as a result of excessive behaviors.

## Abstract

In *The Big Bang Theory*, Mrs. Wolowitz is the only fat character on the show but is also the only character to never have her entire body shown to viewers. This essay analyzes the implications of removing the fat body from visual displays and how the show situates Mrs. Wolowitz within the contexts of the freak show, fat stigma, and corrective health narratives, which ultimately demands that fat bodies never be displayed to viewers.

In the end, the main attraction is undoubtedly the sight of the fat body. People did not pay to hear a description of a fat person; they came to see the fat person in the flesh. A counterexample of the displaying of fatness occurs in the modern CBS sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*. The television show focuses on a group of four nerds who work at CalTech: Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter, two physicists; Raj Koothrappali, an astrophysicist; and Howard Wolowitz, an aerospace engineer. The show follows their nerdy lives as they interact with their neighbor, Penny, an aspiring actress, and numerous other characters. Out of all of the characters in the show, there is only one character who is fat and one character whose body is never shown; that character is Howard's mother, Mrs. Wolowitz.

Since, in the freak show, the visual display of the fat body and the denigration of the fat body are indistinguishable, it may seem that intentionally avoiding the display of Mrs. Wolowitz's fat body would cease the freakification of fatness. It might seem that the absence of the fat body would provide fat people with more control over the construction of their own identity.

However, in this paper I argue that merely not showing the fat body does *not* accomplish this task. First, in applying research on social stigma and an analysis of the historical context shaping cultural attitudes about fatness, I demonstrate that Mrs. Wolowitz's fat body, and fatness in general, is still denigrated despite the absence of a visible fat body. Second, by examining narratives in general and the medical narrative within the show, I prove that the show moves beyond merely degrading the fat body and dictates that fatness must be controlled and ultimately corrected. Third, by exploring Jeannine Gailey's theory of hyper(in)visibility, which is the paradox of the fat body being both metaphorically invisible and actually visible at the same time, I demonstrate that the absence of Mrs. Wolowitz's fat body in the show creates a clear message that the fat body is so "unruly" and "ugly" that it does not even deserve to be looked at, that it should be erased from public view. I believe it is impossible to reclaim fat identity when the fat body is *not present* and when popular sitcoms subtly state that it *should not be present*. Instead, I believe that the only way to celebrate fat identity and critique negative attitudes about fatness is to allow fat individuals to create their own identities and control the display of their bodies on their own conditions.

## SOCIAL ATTITUDES ABOUT FATNESS

When a fat lady or man was exhibited in the freak show, his or her body consumed the identity of that person. Viewers saw a fat body and the negative characteristics they associated with it. In *The Big Bang Theory*, despite the absence of Mrs. Wolowitz's fat body, her fat identity still consumes her character and makes fatness her defining characteristic. This happens because the social stigma behind fatness is so pervasive that it extends beyond the visual body.

According to Erving Goffman, a stigma is a personal attribute that is “deeply discrediting” due to societal attitudes regarding it, attitudes that can lead to social shunning (257). He states that “an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us” (257). He stresses, however, that stigma is created in social interactions, and the stigma itself is created from the attitudes and perceptions of people towards the stigmatized individual and not from the trait itself.

Among Goffman's three types of stigma, the type that pertains to the fat body is “abominations of the body,” or “various physical deformities” that are visible to others and are difficult to cover up (257). In the case of a fat person, fatness is a physical trait that cannot be disguised; and, according to Goffman's theory, fatness becomes a stigma because of the social attitudes of the people who interact with the fat person. The effect of this on the fat person is insurmountable: the body has the potential to consume the identity of the person, creating a singular identity concentrated on the fat body itself. Any interaction with a fat person, then, is tainted by the stigma that others impose upon that person, denying the fat person a chance of cultivating an acceptable position in society.

One reason that fatness is so stigmatized is that social attitudes about fatness have long existed in American culture. Amy Erdman Farrell studies postcards from the nineteenth century to determine the social attitudes toward fatness. Farrell notices that, in the beginning and middle of that century, fatness was first a positive characteristic. She states that a “hefty body” was a marker of both wealth and health, signifying that a person had the money to feed themselves properly (27). However, she discovers there were other perceptions of fatness. Many times, growing businesses and corrupt

politicians would be depicted as fat; but she notes that the fat person was not perceived as a physical or moral threat. Instead, the fat body was a way to represent the corruption in the political system; the negative attitudes were directed at the politicians, not the fat body (31). A final depiction of a fat person was a spectacle in the form of an extremely fat person; however, the stigma here was not on the fat person himself but rather on the “uniqueness” of the individual (32).

However, starting in the late nineteenth century, Farrell notices a shift toward social attitudes that viewed fatness as a negative trait. She believes that there were multiple factors that contributed to this changing viewpoint. On one side, remnants of Protestant thinking portrayed fatness as a sign of a “deficient body” resulting from the failure to control one’s desires and appetites (45). On the other side, as theories of evolution began to circulate, ideas about “stages of civilization” cast certain types of bodies as inferior based on multiple criteria – racial difference, gender differences, sexual differences, and differences in body types: thinness vs. fatness (60). By the beginning of the twentieth century, people already believed that fatness was a negative characteristic; within the minds of Americans, the “connotations of fatness”—that the fat person was gluttonous, lazy, stupid, and sinful—were already planted (34).

Today, these attitudes about fatness have become so ingrained in our minds that Mrs. Wolowitz’s character cannot escape them, even without her body being displayed. Throughout the show, the single defining feature of Mrs. Wolowitz is her fatness. There is emphasis on her eating habits: in one episode we learn that Mrs. Wolowitz has to eat Oreos during her bath (“The Staircase Implementation”), and in another episode we hear that Mrs. Wolowitz’s hand is stuck in the garbage disposal because she won’t let go of a “perfectly good chicken leg” (“The Habitation Configuration”).

Besides eating, her extreme physical size is stressed so much that it freakifies her. In one episode, after Mrs. Wolowitz has been injured, Howard jokes about getting a forklift to help his mother get up the stairs (“The Gorilla Dissolution”). In another episode, Mrs. Wolowitz has what is presumably a heart attack while in the bathroom. When Howard tells his friends that he lifted her to the car, Penny is astounded: “You picked up your mother? Her own legs are barely able to do that.” Howard, trying to find a plausible explanation, says, “I was filled with adrenaline. It happens to be how women

lift cars off babies.” Penny, looking at him incredulously, says that it would be easier to lift a car than lift Mrs. Wolowitz (“The Engagement Reaction”). There are countless other episodes in which she is described as being big enough to hide behind her shadow (“The Bakersfield Expedition”) as well as being so big that she appears in every single picture in Howard and Bernadette’s wedding album (“The Parking Spot Escalation”). This not only presents fatness as a comedic element, but it also freakifies Mrs. Wolowitz by reducing her identity into a single issue—her fatness—that marks her as other. When we focus our attention on her, we focus solely on her “abnormal” body size; her humanity has been replaced by the size of her body and food intake.

The othering of Mrs. Wolowitz is so severe that she herself has internalized the idea that fatness is a state of being out-of-control and physically undesirable. In “The Hawking Excitation,” Sheldon is helping Mrs. Wolowitz try on a dress for Howard’s wedding. As he is trying to push her body into the dress and zip her up, Sheldon says, “If I squeeze you any tighter, you may turn into a diamond.” Mrs. Wolowitz responds—one of the only times she actually addresses her large size head on: “You’re right, who am I kidding? You should have seen me when I was young, Sheldon. The fellas used to line up and bring me boxes of candy. Why did I eat it all?” (“The Hawking Excitation”). First, this quote from Mrs. Wolowitz directly links excessiveness and overeating with fatness, drawing a connection between the two and reinforcing the notion that to be fat is to be out of control. Second, this quote implies that, once Mrs. Wolowitz became fat, she no longer had “fellas” lining up with boxes of chocolate. This suggests that fatness marred her character and made her “ugly”; she essentially believes that fatness makes her undesirable. But, most importantly, these ideas are no longer simply social attitudes; they are now intrinsic and reciprocal attitudes that Mrs. Wolowitz holds about herself. Instead of being merely the recipient of social stigma regarding her body, Mrs. Wolowitz is both the sender and receiver. And so, the absence of her body from the show does nothing to prevent her from being stigmatized and othered.

## **NARRATIVES OF CORRECTION**

In *The Big Bang Theory*, there are many narratives introduced in the beginning of the show that get resolved throughout the course of the show.

For example, in the beginning, Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj are all single; currently, in its ninth season, all four of them are in relationships. But, when we consider Mrs. Wolowitz, her only narrative arc concerns her body size. Therefore, the show's very narrative structure contains a health narrative that dictates that Mrs. Wolowitz's fatness must be corrected.

Narrative hinges upon introducing a form of imbalance – a wrong that needs to be righted, a challenge that needs to be overcome – and then subsequently attempting to correct that imbalance and bring it back to equilibrium. However, this imbalance can appear in the form of bodily difference as well. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder focus on this exact issue in their book, *Narrative Prosthesis*. Mitchell and Snyder define narrative prosthesis as “the dependency of literary narratives upon disability” (53). They state that narrative is predicated ideologically on the introduction of some conflict or deviance and the subsequent attempt to resolve that deviance. However, they also claim that when narrative specifically focuses on characters with disabilities, “the effort to narrate disability's myriad deviations is an attempt to bring the body's unruliness under control” (6). As they later state, rarely is the narrative able to return a character to “normal” status, and thus the character with disabilities is either “left behind or punished for its lack of conformity” (55).

While *Narrative Prosthesis* focuses on narrative's reliance on disability in literature, there are also national health narratives that make the same demands on the fat body. In Pat Lyons's article in the *Fat Studies Reader*, she states that the National Institutes of Health labels “over 60% of Americans as ‘overweight or obese’”; this is perceived by NIH as a sign of the “obesity epidemic” sweeping the country (75). Lyon's description of this moral panic certainly seems accurate: according to a CBS article written by Gina Pace, in 2006, the U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona said that “obesity is the terror within. Unless we do something about it, the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9-11 or any other terrorist attempt.”

As the public has come to accept the war on obesity, Lyons states that the “diet and weight loss industry has moved from the sidelines to the center of American life” (75). These two industries have remained crucial to shaping attitudes regarding fatness, advertising that the only way to achieve happiness and a healthy lifestyle is by losing weight. This “war on obesity” demands that people labeled as “overweight” and “obese” lose weight so they

can become healthy, even though sustained long-term weight loss has been proven to be ineffective; according to Lyons, the “failure rate for sustained weight loss has remained constant at 90-95%” (75). Nevertheless, millions of Americans continue to believe in the health narrative that dictates weight loss.

This practice of introducing disability into narrative and then attempting to “bring the body’s unruliness under control” is highly prevalent in *The Big Bang Theory*. Raj has a psychological inability to talk to women. However, when he wants to talk to women, he drinks alcohol to return himself to “normalcy.” After a significant breakup with a girlfriend, Raj eventually finds that he has been cured of his psychological problem and can then talk to women without alcohol. While Sheldon never overcomes his OCD-like tendencies, the show is filled with countless instances when his friends attempt to change his behavior. For example, when they eat dinner in their apartment, Sheldon always has to sit in ‘his’ spot on the couch. During one episode, Leonard buys a dining room table and attempts to force Sheldon to alter his routine. But Sheldon refuses to eat at it, and the gang eventually returns to their usual dinner schedule.

However, most importantly to my argument, *The Big Bang Theory* also attempts to correct Mrs. Wolowitz’s body and bring her deviance back to normal. The show states clearly that her weight negatively affects her health; in one episode, Mrs. Wolowitz takes thirty minutes to walk up two flights of stairs (“The Weekend Vortex”). In multiple other episodes, she needs Howard’s help to put on or take off clothing, to take baths, and to rub lotion on herself.

After establishing that Mrs. Wolowitz’s body is deviant and her weight is having “negative” effects on her health, the show then dictates that she must correct the problem through exercise. In one episode, it is revealed that Mrs. Wolowitz once attended a Weight Watchers cruise (“The Higgs Boson Observation”). In another episode, Howard says that she goes to a water aerobics class (“The Spaghetti Catalyst”). And finally, in one episode, Howard gets Mrs. Wolowitz a treadmill because “the doctor says you need to get exercise” even though Mrs. Wolowitz claims that she already gets enough exercise (“The Gorilla Dissolution”). This depicts Mrs. Wolowitz as a person who is out of shape and is experiencing negative consequences from her fatness. Thus, as Mitchell and Snyder suggest, the show attempts to “correct”

Mrs. Wolowitz by demanding that she exercise in order to lose weight. In the end, this mandate takes Mrs. Wolowitz's life. While the show never states the cause of her death, she is the only main character to die on the show and the only character whose cause of death is not old age. The show is essentially sending the message that fatness must be corrected or it will be removed from the show altogether.

## THE EFFECTS OF INVISIBILITY

While Mrs. Wolowitz's body from *The Big Bang Theory* might not be at the forefront of viewers' minds, the absence of her body from the show is an intentional decision made by its producer. And, when fatness is alluded to or described, it is relegated to stories, fat suits, or words – the actual fat body is never shown. In this manner, the show is effectually erasing and replacing the fat body with the thin body, stating that fatness is so “repellant” that it *must not* be shown on television.

The decision not to show Mrs. Wolowitz's body is, at its core, a stylistic choice made by the director of the show. In 2012, Mark Dawidziak from *The Plain Dealer* interviewed Carol Ann Susi, who is the voice of Mrs. Wolowitz. According to Susi, when Chuck Lorre, the director of *The Big Bang Theory*, discussed Mrs. Wolowitz's role with her, he said, “Carlton the Doorman. That's the kind of thing we're going for here.” Dawidziak points out that Mrs. Wolowitz actually fits into a larger string of characters that are heard but never seen, saying that Mrs. Wolowitz is a “part of that long TV tradition of equally [invisible] enigmatic characters.” Among those other characters, Dawidziak mentions Carlton the Doorman from “Rhoda,” Orson from “Mork and Mindy,” the PA announcer from “M\*A\*S\*H,” and Robin Masters from “Magnum, P.I.” It is undeniable that Mrs. Wolowitz's absence from the screen is because the director wanted to achieve a certain kind of cinematic effect, a character that is mysterious and enigmatic.

From Dawidziak's interview, however, it is also clear the actress was not concerned about the effect that not showing Mrs. Wolowitz's body would have. When Dawidziak asked her how she responded when Lore told her that Mrs. Wolowitz would be an off-stage character, Susi replied: “It didn't bother me that they'd never show Howard's mother. I absolutely didn't care. A job's a job.” It's clear that Lore and Susi were not concerned about what kind of message it would send if the only fat woman on the show



was relegated beyond the eyes of the viewer while the (thin) characters on-stage constantly made jokes about her weight.

An integral concept linked with Mrs. Wolowitz's visibility/invisibility is "hyper(in)visibility." Jeannine Gailey has coined the term "hyper(in)visibility," which is a paradoxical state of visibility/invisibility that occurs in relation to the fat individual. She notes that the fat body is hypervisible because it is "highly public, visually inspected, and made into a spectacle" (7). This materializes in the fact that fatness cannot be hidden; fat people cannot go out in public without having their bodies looked at and visually dissected by strangers. However, she also notes that the fat body is hyperinvisible in that it is "marginalized and erased" to the point where it is dismissed altogether (7). This is demonstrated by the fact that desks and seating on public transportation, for example, are made for the "average-sized" person. Society treats the fat person as if they do not exist, sending the message to fat people that it is *they* who have to fit into *society*, not vice versa. This paradoxical state of hyper(in)visibility – of being simultaneously scrutinized in public and ignored and erased – is a state that fat individuals have to live with.

This state of hyper(in)visibility occurs in *The Big Bang Theory* just as Gailey describes. Mrs. Wolowitz's identity as a fat person is hypervisible because her body type and life are constantly discussed on the show by the characters. An episode hardly goes by without the characters mentioning her weight, her eating habits, her bathroom habits, or her relationship with Howard. Without even seeing her in person, her life is publicly dissected and turned into a spectacle for us to laugh at. On the other hand, Mrs. Wolowitz's hyperinvisibility has been taken to the extreme: her identity as a fat person has been so erased that her body is not even shown to viewers. She is literally as "invisible" as any character can be without disappearing from the show altogether.

*The Big Bang Theory* does not hide her body entirely, though; instead, it provides us with three brief glimpses of Mrs. Wolowitz. But these moments merely emphasize her absence and the thin body that fills that absence. The first glimpse we get of her is at Howard's wedding in "The Countdown Reflection;" but we get an aerial view of the rooftop where the ceremony is taking place, so all we can identify about Mrs. Wolowitz is that she is larger than the other characters. In the next season, we get a brief glimpse of her as she is walking past an open door; but again, the moment is brief and all we can

make out is a large woman (“The Spoiler Alert Segmentation”). The third and final time we see her body, it is not a real body at all; instead, in “The Cooper Extraction,” we see a fake scenario where Mrs. Wolowitz is dead, and so all we see is a skeleton in a large dress. These brief moments where we catch a glimpse of Mrs. Wolowitz’s body are simply reminders of why the fat body is not visible. This systematic hiding of Mrs. Wolowitz’s fat body and the refusal to show her body just reiterates that it is being hidden because, according to the stigma surrounding fatness, it should not be shown, that the only body that should be shown is the thin body.

The show continues the erasure of the fat body by highlighting the thin body and celebrating the loss of fatness in other characters. In “The Grasshopper Experiment,” Raj is on a date with an Indian woman named Lalita Gupta. Because the two were childhood acquaintances, Raj decides to bring up the subject of her weight loss since he knew her before it happened: “You have lost so much weight! That must have been difficult for you because you were so, so fat! Do you remember?” Lalita confirms that she does remember. Raj, too drunk to understand that Lalita is uncomfortable with this subject, continues by saying, “Of course you do. Who could forget being that fat?” Lalita blushes and says, “Well, I’ve been trying.” Later, when Raj introduces Lalita to all of his friends, he ends with saying, “Isn’t it great, she isn’t fat anymore!” (“The Grasshopper Experiment”). By focusing on the thin body of Lalita and contrasting it with the hidden fat body that she used to possess, this scene clearly hides and erases the fat body and the experiences of fat people. And, since Lalita’s fat body only exists in the past and the show refuses to show it in the present, this scene reinforces the demands that fatness must be eradicated, that it is a state so “deplorable” that it should not only be forgotten, but its loss should be celebrated.

Not only is the fat body erased, but when fat suits are used in the show, the thin characters are even given the control over the display and representation of fatness. In “The Cooper Extraction,” Sheldon visits Texas over the holidays because his sister is having a baby. While he is absent, the rest of the cast throw a Christmas tree decorating party and envision how their lives would be different if they had never met Sheldon. When asked why Leonard and Raj never lived together, Raj narrates what would have happened if they had. In the imagined scene, Raj prepares dinner for the two of them while Leonard is sitting, wearing a fat suit and reading a newspaper. At this point,

Leonard interrupts in the present time and asks why he is fat and Raj is not. In the next instant, we are transported back to the fake scene, but this time Raj is also fat. An instant later, another character from the show also walks in wearing a fat suit, apparently inserting himself into the story and donning an imaginary fat suit because he wanted to be included in someone's story. The use of fat suits in this episode is extremely problematic because it once again emphasizes the thin body while hiding the fat body. The episode suggests that fat bodies can only be shown if they are not *real* fat bodies. And even though fake fat bodies are being shown, the emphasis is always on the *thin* actors who have the power to shed their fat suits and revert to their original (thin) bodies.

Finally, some of the language in the show even erases the fatness and euphemizes the fat identity. In the "Hawking Excitation," Mrs. Wolowitz refers to stuffing her body into a dress as "folding a sleeping bag." In another episode, she refers to her body as spilling out of a girdle "like the Pillsbury Doughboy" ("The Hot Troll Deviation"). And finally, as I have already mentioned, there are several instances where her body is described as being like a car or needing to be lifted by a forklift. Even though it is not entirely pervasive throughout the entire show, the repetitive use of euphemisms, used both by the characters and Mrs. Wolowitz, to describe and replace the fat body serves to further erase the identity of fat individuals. The show's message remains clear: the fat body is so "abhorrent" that not only should it be hidden from view, but the very word "fat" should never even be uttered.

## RECLAIMING FAT IDENTITY

So far, the absence of Mrs. Wolowitz's body in *The Big Bang Theory* has only managed to label her body as deviant and reinforce the societal demand that it be corrected and erased. Therefore, I would like to highlight some movements that are rooted in celebrating the fat body and challenging the negative societal attitudes against fat people.

Within the health industry, there is a movement called Health at Every Size, or HAES™, that celebrates the fat body instead of describing it as unhealthy. As Deb Burgard defines the movement in her article in the *Fat Studies Reader*, HAES™ does not define health "by a certain type of weight for all (such as thinness), but rather it defines the correct weight for a person when they are living a healthy lifestyle" (44). Instead of arguing that health will be

achieved when a person reaches a particular weight (thinness), HAES™ is built upon the premise that a healthy lifestyle will lead to a healthy weight for that individual. Two of the core beliefs of HAES™ are that every body type should be celebrated and that weight stigma and prejudice are very harmful to the fat individual (Burgard 50).

There are also two modern examples of attractions that challenge the superiority of thinness. Sharon Mazer writes about Katy Dierlam, who performed as a fat woman at Coney Island's Sideshow in 1992. Her stage name was "Helen Melon." In her show, Dierlam/Melon would display her body for viewers and talk with them about her body. But instead of allowing the sideshow to exploit her, she used her performance to challenge the norms that surrounded her body image. During her performance, Dierlam/Melon states openly what her audience is thinking about her body. According to Mazer, she identifies those thoughts as "cultural stereotypes" and thus "reverses the lens of her performance" onto the audience (260). Dierlam/Melon is hoping that her audience will confront their own prejudices about the fat body and, in the end, change them.

Another example of challenging the narrative surrounding fatness is the series of art installations created by Rachel Herrick, titled *The Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies*. In her travelling museum, Herrick displays mannequins that she calls "obeasts;" these mannequins are actually modeled after her own body. By presenting the "obeast" as a wild animal, Herrick is directly stating what many people subconsciously believe: that fatness is degrading and somehow animalistic. As people visit her museums, they see these exaggerated social norms and hopefully reexamine their own notions about fatness.

If the freak show is any indication, the human tendency is to display difference, not celebrate it. The HAES™ movement, Dierlam/Melon, and Herrick have all chosen to counteract the effects of the freak show. They are attempting to foster an environment where difference is celebrated, where fatness is seen as beautiful and normal. They are trying to raise awareness about the consequences of our actions and words on fat people today. Perhaps, if their message was more widespread, Chuck Lorre and Carol Ann Susi would have been troubled by the thought of making Mrs. Wolowitz a hidden fat character and relegating fat identity to the unseen shadows. Unfortunately, their decision can no longer be reversed. During the eighth sea-

son of *The Big Bang Theory*, Carol Ann Susi died, and, with her, the character of Mrs. Wolowitz disappeared forever from the show. Since it is too late to change *The Big Bang Theory*, our only hope lies in this: celebrating fat identity and eradicating the stigma surrounding it so that the next Mrs. Wolowitz can stand proudly on that stage for the entire world to see.

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